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SUBJECT: BISSAU-GUINEAN MEDIA ON LIFE SUPPORT

SUMMARY

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: Government and private media in Guinea-Bissau barely function and rely heavily on the international donor community to survive. Nonetheless, editors have a solid grasp of the role of independent media in building a pluralist democracy as well as advancing national reconciliation and reconstruction. The average "daily" appears weekly with a print run of 1,000 copies at a street price of about USD 1, and the estimated monthly salary of a journalist is USD 75. Like other sectors, the media has suffered from brain drain. Poverty, low wages and the absence of advertising markets make the media vulnerable to corruption and inclined to practice self-censorship. Irregularities in the electricity supply remain a serious impediment to communications and production. While most elite speak Portuguese, radio broadcasting in indigenous languages appears to be the most effective means of communicating with the general public. Media are overwhelmingly concentrated in Bissau, with the notable exception of an estimated 42 community radio stations in the country. END SUMMARY.

12. (U) February 7-8, Information Officer and FSN Information Specialist visited Bissau to assess the media landscape in Guinea-Bissau.

STATE SECRETARY SAYS PRESS FREEDOM "GUARANTEED"

13. (SBU) An experienced journalist trained in Lisbon, State Secretary for Social Communication Joao de Barros is also the owner and director of the independent newspaper Diario de Bissau. Barros claims to have been arrested and imprisoned more than ten times during President Kumba Yala's regime. He asserted that under President Vieira, press freedom is "guaranteed" and that the Government does not pressure or otherwise seek to control the media. Barros noted that not a single journalist is in jail ("or will be," he added).

14. (SBU) Barros believes the fundamental obstacles facing media in Guinea-Bissau are a lack of resources and training/education. He said there has been an "invasion" of young journalists in Bissau who lack any relevant

training, education or experience. He lamented that this cohort cannot fill the void left by the exodus of experienced journalists from the country during the 1998-99 civil war. He characterized government support for media as "minimal" -- limited to fully subsidizing ten print runs for three private newspapers to help them regain their financial footing. Barros shared a hand-drawn floor plan of a new facility to house a new School of Journalism. A site has been identified for the school, but no project timeline or detailed budget currently exists. Barros said the European Union has "committed" to providing technical equipment for the school's classrooms, studios, and production facilities. He plans to submit a proposal to Embassy-Dakar's Office of Defense Cooperation to fund construction.

STATE MEDIA AS WEAK AS PRIVATE MEDIA

15. (SBU) According to General Director Lamine Djata, Guinea-Bissau's state-run National Radio is the country's "radio of record" and provides a credible counterweight to private stations prone to "impartial" reporting. Broadcasting in 13 languages, the station has found it impossible to air all of its material within its current 18-hour daily broadcast. Djata outlined plans to expand to a 24-hour programming schedule with a format devoted to general news and politics, followed by the establishment of a second frequency devoted to "youth and women's issues," but he admitted that these plans are completely dependent on additional funding. Technical Director Porfirio da Costa said that while the station's staff is paid in full and on time, the station receives no funds for maintenance, equipment upgrades or supplies. He noted that several of the station's computers had recently been

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disabled by a virus, and that the station cannot afford the software necessary to fix the problem or prevent future incidents. He also noted that he does not have a single working vehicle for his maintenance staff to service antennas and transmitters outside of Bissau.

16. (SBU) Established in 1989, Guinea-Bissau's state-run National Television has ten journalists and only three cameras. Deputy Director Luis Melo said his station airs programs only in Portuguese and Kriolu, and while it has offices in the provinces, they are closed due to lack of funds. It broadcasts only sporadically and must negotiate informal agreements to arrange for electricity at a desired time to broadcast the news. Personnel receive only 50 percent of their salaries, and the total staff of 100 will be trimmed to 60 by the end of the year. Melo echoed other local sources in estimating the average salary of a journalist in Guinea-Bissau as USD 75 per month.

LOCAL AND FOREIGN BROADCAST MEDIA

17. (SBU) The private radio station Bombolom has a staff of 12 journalists and covers more than 90 percent of the country. It broadcasts in Portuguese, French, Kriolu and Wolof. Currently broadcasting programs from BBC and Deutsche Welle, Director Agnelo Augusto Regalla expressed interest in pursuing an agreement with VOA. He painted a gloomy picture of the media landscape and said that despite relative calm in Bissau, the political situation is a "powder keg." He did note, however, that there has been a lessening of tensions in government-media relations since President Vieira's October 2005 inauguration. Regalla ascribed this to the current government's understanding that encroachment on media freedoms could adversely affect flows of foreign assistance. He added that a lack of human and financial capital, combined with meager media and advertising markets, make journalists vulnerable to self-censorship and corruption (Regalla complained that Pindjiguiti has been "bought off" by

Vieira).

¶8. (SBU) Marta Jorge, a Portuguese national and General Director of RTP-Africa in Bissau, wryly noted that she has had to "educate" several governments on the role of independent media by refusing to accept strong-armed "invitations" to cover their speeches and events. She gave accounts of intimidation during the 2005 presidential election season but agreed that overt pressure on media has subsided since Vieira's inauguration. Jorge expressed interest in receiving USG statements and materials from Embassy-Dakar that touch on not only Guinea-Bissau but also West Africa and the continent as a whole.

¶9. (SBU) Established in 1995, Pindjiguiti is a private radio station that covers approximately 60 percent of the country's territory. Its founder, Jose Rodrigues-Santy, currently devotes his considerable energy to other business pursuits and has delegated station management responsibilities to his Belgian wife, Mariska Meert. The Pindjiguiti Group also includes the now-defunct newspaper Fraskera, but Meert said she plans to revive this publication. Santy described morale in the media as low but agreed that press freedoms are largely respected in the current environment. He added that journalists are keenly aware of their role in contributing to national reconciliation and reconstruction. Santy complained that Barros should not be able to serve as Minister of Social Communication while maintaining a business interest in a private newspaper. Without a trace of irony, Santy noted that his other sources of revenue include serving as a media consultant to Armed Forces Chief of Staff Baptista Tagme Na Wai.

PRINT MEDIA ALSO IN DIRE STRAITS

¶10. (U) The print sector is also in dire straits, with the country's 5-6 newspapers unable to print on a regular basis due to chronic shortages of material inputs and

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electricity. The average "daily" in Guinea-Bissau is printed once a week with a print run of 1,000 copies at a street price of 500 CFA francs (CFAF)(USD 1). Major newspapers include the state-run No Pintcha, which is co-located with the country's only printing facility (also owned by the Government) and the independent newspapers Diario de Bissau and Gazeta de Noticias.

LOCAL MEDIA NGOS EAGER TO RAISE STANDARDS

¶11. (U) A new Union of Journalists was formed in May 2005 to take the place of several dormant and dysfunctional predecessors. Most key players in the local media see the value of a single umbrella organization to defend journalists' interests and support their development. The Union's President, Mamadu Cande, painted a bleak picture of the media in Guinea-Bissau and said local media are "starting from zero." He admitted that the Union does not even have reliable statistics on the number and location of journalists in the country. Cande is interested in any available U.S.-based expertise, exchange opportunities, or training workshops co-sponsored by Embassy-Dakar that could serve to strengthen the Union and its members.

¶12. (U) The Union has a good relationship with the leadership of the Press House, a non-governmental organization established in 2000 to provide a venue for meetings, training sessions and access to computers/Internet. Led by Executive Director Domingos Meta Camara, the Press House has a limited but significant track record in managing grant funding from the UNDP, the EU, and several NGOs. Camara presented a request for grant assistance totaling USD 26,000 to secure one year's worth of Internet access for the House's common-access computer room, miscellaneous office equipment and

supplies, and two workshops focusing on the role of journalists in democratization, peacebuilding and national reconciliation.

COMMENT

¶13. (SBU) Due to severe economic hardships and a lack of human capital, Bissau-Guinean media face a daunting range of challenges. That said, local journalists are eager for training, and editors have a solid, even sophisticated grasp of the role of independent media in building a pluralist democracy, facilitating national reconciliation and advancing the country's reconstruction. While most elite speak Portuguese (and to a lesser extent, French), due to a dearth of televisions and widespread illiteracy, radio broadcasting in indigenous languages (Kriolu, Balanta, Fula and Mandinga) appears to be the most effective means of communicating with the general public. Embassy-Dakar's presence and resources in Guinea-Bissau may be limited --but it is clear that in such an environment, even modest support can have a major impact.
END COMMENT.

JACKSON